

**WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:**

1. A web-based communications network for automatically administering a controlled relationship among students, educational institutions, and student financial aid processors and for providing selectable services 5 related to student financial aid application and administration, said selectable services comprising:

a financial aid estimation service for predicting the amount of financial aid that may be available to a given student;

10 a student interview service for collecting personal, financial, and educational information about a given student;

15 a file processing service, available to student financial aid processors, for reviewing information about a given student and for determining eligibility for various types of financial aid that are available to a student; and

a reporting service, available to educational institutions, for generating reports of selected students and their respective financial aid packages.

2. A web-based communications network as in claim 1, wherein the amount of financial aid predicted via said financial aid estimation service comprises estimated grant amounts, estimated loan amounts, and estimated scholarship 5 amounts provided by federal, private, or institutional sources.

3. A web-based communications network as in claim 1, further comprising a personal identification service for issuing personal identification information to a user, and wherein provision of the issued personal identification 5 information is required for access to selected other services of said web-based communications network.

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4. A web-based communications network as in claim 3, wherein the personal identification information issued via said personal identification service is utilized as an electronic signature for affirming various statements 5 presented in accordance with financial aid application and administration.

5. A web-based communications network as in claim 1, further comprising a federal aid link service, for electronically relaying federal aid eligibility information between a selected government agency and said web-based 5 communications network.

6. A web-based communications network as in claim 5, wherein the information reviewed by a student financial aid processor via said file processing service comprises information provided about a given student via said student 5 interview service as well as enrollment information obtained from an educational institution and federal aid eligibility information obtained via said federal aid link service.

7. A web-based communications network as in claim 5, wherein said federal aid service electronically requests and relays institutional student information report (ISIR) documentation from the United States Department of 5 Education's Central Processing System to the web-based communications network.

8. A web-based communications network as in claim 6, wherein information reviewed by a student financial aid processor via said file processing service is analyzed with regards to compliance standards and subsequently 5 characterized as compliant or not compliant with aid eligibility standards, and wherein said compliance standards relate to issues comprising selected of

citizenship status, selective service registration, financial history and social security name conflict.

9. A web-based communications network as in claim 1, further comprising a loan certification service for transferring master promissory note (MPN) information between a student and a financial lender, wherein said 5 financial lender is characterized as one who provides monetary educational funding to a student.

10. A web-based communications network as in claim 6, further comprising an automated communications service for generating and sending an electronic message from a student or educational institution to a student financial aid 5 processor.

11. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system featuring integrated and automated on-line financial aid features to a user, wherein said web-based application comprises:

5 a first information collection service for obtaining requested personal and financial information about a given student; and

10 a financial aid estimation service for generating a predicted amount of monetary aid that may be available for the student to use for education-related expenses, whereby the predicted amount of monetary aid generated via said financial aid estimation service is based on information obtained via said first information collection service.

12. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 11, wherein said web-based application further comprises a registration service for applying for and receiving a user 5 identification element, and whereby said user identification element is utilized for obtaining future

access to said web-based application, including various features and services thereof.

13. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 12, further comprising a second information collection service, for obtaining additionally requested information related to 5 personal demographics, financial matters, and educational endeavors of a given student.

14. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 13, further comprising a federal link service for electronically relaying federal aid eligibility information between the 5 web-based system and selected government agencies, wherein one of said selected government agencies corresponds to the United States Department of Education.

15. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 11, further comprising a federal link service for electronically relaying federal aid eligibility information between the 5 web-based system and processing systems of selected government agencies, wherein one of said selected government agencies corresponds to the United States Department of Education.

16. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 15, further comprising a student file establishment service for generating a hard copy of selected information pertaining 5 to a given student.

17. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 16, wherein selected information obtained via said student file establishment service comprises information obtained via said first

5 information collection service and said second information collection service, federal aid eligibility information obtained via said federal link service, and enrollment information about a given student obtained from an educational institution.

18. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 14, further comprising a file processing service for reviewing obtained information about a given student and for determining 5 eligibility for various types of financial aid that are potentially available to a student.

19. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 17, further comprising a file processing service for reviewing information collected about a given student via said file 5 establishment service and for determining eligibility for various types of financial aid that are potentially available for a student.

20. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 19, further comprising a loan application service for electronically relaying master promissory note (MPN) documentation between 5 a system user and a loan guarantor, wherein said loan guarantor is characterized as one who provides monetary assistance to a student for education-related expenses.

21. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 15, wherein said federal aid link service provides links at the web-based system for directly connecting a user to a FAFSA on-line 5 web-based location and to an IRS on-line web-based location.

22. A web-based application for providing a multi-

level financial aid system as in claim 19, further comprising an integrated feature that automatically updates the web-based application, particularly updating information related to received documents and progress of financial aid processing.

23. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 21, further comprising a reporting system service available to a user of the web-based application, for obtaining updated information about the financial aid system and progress involved with said file processing service thereof.

24. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 19, further comprising a communications service for automatically generating and sending an electronic communication from a student or educational institution to a student financial aid processor.

25. A web-based application for providing a multi-level financial aid system as in claim 12, wherein the user identification element received via said registration service is utilized as an electronic signature for affirming various statements presented in accordance with the multi-level financial aid system.

26. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student, said automated method employed in conjunction with an interactive on-line financial aid system, wherein said method comprises the following steps:

generating a personalized identification element for a user of the on-line financial aid system, wherein future provision of such a personalized identification element to the on-line system enables access to selected features and services thereof;

obtaining requested demographic, financial, and education related data from a user, and subsequently relaying selected of this obtained data to a financial aid processor; and

20 reviewing information requested in said obtaining step, wherein said reviewing step is performed by a financial aid processing center, and wherein said reviewing step results in characterizing a student as either eligible or ineligible for particular types of financial aid.

27. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student as in claim 26, further comprising a step of obtaining additional information about a student, and whereby such additional information is subsequently relayed 5 to a financial aid processor.

28. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student as in claim 27, wherein said additional information comprises aid eligibility information from the US Department of Education.

29. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student as in claim 28, wherein said additional information further comprises enrollment information from a specific educational institution.

30. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student as in claim 29, wherein said reviewing step corresponds to a review of federal aid eligibility information and enrollment information in addition to the 5 information requested in said step of obtaining requested data from a user.

31. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student as in claim 26, wherein said step of obtaining requested data from a user and subsequently relaying selected of this obtained data is performed electronically

5 in a secure environment such that flow of electronic data  
is encrypted and kept confidential from third parties that  
may try to access the on-line financial aid system.

32. An automated method for providing financial aid  
to a student as in claim 29, wherein said step of obtaining  
additional information is also performed electronically in  
a secure environment such that flow of electronic data is  
5 encrypted and kept confidential from third parties that may  
try to access the on-line financial aid system.

33. An automated method for providing financial aid  
to a student as in claim 28, wherein compliance issues  
analyzed in said reviewing step correspond to selected of  
citizenship status, selective service registration,  
5 financial history, and social security name conflicts.

34. An automated method for providing financial aid  
to a student as in claim 26, further comprising a step of  
offering a financial aid estimate to a user, wherein such  
an estimate is based on information inputted to the on-line  
5 financial aid system by a user and then evaluated with  
respect to established aid qualification guidelines.

35. An automated method for providing financial aid  
to a student as in claim 33, wherein the financial aid  
estimate provided via said offering step predicts an amount  
of grants, loans and scholarships offered by federal  
5 agencies or educational institutions for which a student is  
apparently eligible.

36. An automated method for providing financial aid  
to a student as in claim 27, further comprising a step of  
linking a user to a selected website by choosing a  
selection available to the on-line system and subsequently  
5 being electronically transferred to that selected website.

37. An automated method for providing financial aid

to a student as in claim 26, further comprising a step of requesting the personalized identification element established via said generating step for use as an 5 electronic signature to affirm various statements presented in accordance with the on-line financial aid system.

38. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student, said automated method employed in conjunction with an interactive on-line financial aid system, wherein said method comprises the following steps:

5 requesting from a user certain initial information about a student;

offering a financial aid estimate to a user, wherein such an estimate is based on an evaluation of the requested initial student information with respect to established aid 10 qualification guidelines;

generating a personalized identification element for a user of the on-line financial aid system, wherein future provision of such a personalized identification element to the on-line system enables access to selected features and 15 services thereof;

obtaining requested demographic, financial, and education related data from a user, and subsequently relaying selected of this obtained data to a financial aid processor;

20 establishing a financial aid file for a student, wherein such a file comprises copies of information relayed in said obtaining step;

reviewing information contained in a student's financial aid file, wherein said reviewing step is 25 performed by a financial aid processing center, and wherein said reviewing step determines a student's eligibility for certain types of financial aid; and

30 performing a quality control and certification check of a student's financial aid file and corresponding information to ensure that all steps are completed for an eligible student to properly receive his or her monetary assistance.

39. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student as in claim 38, further comprising a step of obtaining federal aid eligibility information from the US Department of Education as well as enrollment information 5 from a specific educational institution, and wherein the federal aid eligibility information and the enrollment information is subsequently relayed to a financial aid processor.

40. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student as in claim 38, wherein said reviewing step corresponds to a review of federal aid eligibility information and enrollment information in addition to the 5 information requested in said obtaining step.

41. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student as in claim 38, wherein said step of obtaining requested data from a user and subsequently relaying selected of this obtained data is performed electronically 5 in a secure environment such that flow of electronic data is encrypted and kept confidential from third parties that may try to access the on-line financial aid system.

42. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student as in claim 38, wherein compliance issues analyzed in said reviewing step correspond to selected of citizenship status, selective service registration, 5 financial history, and social security name conflicts.

43. An automated method for providing financial aid

to a student as in claim 38, wherein the financial aid estimate provided via said offering step predicts an amount of grants, loans and scholarships offered by federal 5 agencies or educational institutions for which a student is eligible.

44. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student as in claim 38, further comprising a step of linking a user to a selected website by choosing a selection available to the on-line system and subsequently 5 being electronically transferred to that selected website.

45. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student as in claim 43, wherein selections available to the on-line system for electronic website transfer include the US Department of Education's FAFSA On-line 5 website and a website for obtaining online personal federal tax information.

46. An automated method for providing financial aid to a student as in claim 38, further comprising a step of requesting the personalized identification element established via said generating step for use as an 5 electronic signature to affirm various statements presented in accordance with the on-line financial aid system.

47. An automated method for processing an on-line student financial aid application, such an application comprising information related to personal demographic facts, financial data, and educational endeavors, wherein 5 said method comprises the following steps:

performing a preliminary review of a financial aid application to ensure that all required information and supporting documentation is available;

10 reviewing a financial aid application to determine whether a student and his or her corresponding information

complies with federal regulatory standards for financial aid eligibility; and

certifying a loan for a given student with a third party lender or guarantor, wherein said step of certifying is performed only after said reviewing step results in a decision that the given student does comply with federal regulatory standards for financial aid eligibility.

48. An automated method for processing an on-line student financial aid application as in claim 47, wherein said method further comprises a step of collecting an Institutional Student Information Report (ISIR) document from the US Department of Education as well as enrollment verification information from a specified educational institution, and wherein such additionally collected information is combined with existing information in a student's financial aid application.

49. An automated method for processing an on-line student financial aid application as in claim 48, wherein said step of performing a preliminary review further comprises a step of requesting information from a student or appropriate entity if such required information and supporting documentation is found to be unavailable.

50. An automated method for processing an on-line student financial aid application as in claim 47, wherein federal regulatory standards analyzed in said reviewing step may relate to selected of citizenship status conflicts, selective service registration conflicts, financial history conflicts, and social security name conflicts.

51. An automated method for processing an on-line student financial aid application as in claim 48, further comprising a step of comparing application information

related to personal demographic facts, financial data, and educational endeavors with the student's ISIR document and enrollment verification data to ensure that information provided from one entity matches with corresponding information provided from other entities.

52. An automated method for processing an on-line student financial aid application as in claim 48, further comprising a step of generating a hard copy collection of paper documents corresponding to selected information contained in a student's financial aid application, and subsequently storing such paper documents in a personalized student file.

53. An automated method for processing an on-line student financial aid application as in claim 47, wherein after said step of certifying a loan for a given student is finished, another step of generating an aid letter  
5 containing types and amounts of financial aid a student is eligible for and sending the letter to the student is effected.

54. An automated method for processing an on-line student financial aid application as in claim 50, wherein said step of certifying a loan for a given student comprises a process of verifying and transmitting master 5 promissory note (MPN) documentation for a given student to a given loan quarantor.